



As Seen In the October 2011 Issue

How do we police the flash mob?

APB SPECIAL REPORT: The Dark Side of Twitter

by Cynthia Brown

Thanks to social networks like Twitter and Facebook, “flash mobs” seem to be cropping up across the globe.

The craze started off in 2003 as peaceful and often humorous acts of public performance such as mass dance routines or street pillow fights.

But in recent years, the activity has taken a darker twist as criminals and thugs, using social networking, get large groups to gather on a moment's notice to participate in everything from robberies to fights to murder.

Law-enforcement officials from Philadelphia to Las Vegas and Los Angeles to Portland have struggled to rein in flash mobs.

In England, authorities are still trying to unravel the role that social media played in fueling the recent riots that broke out across the country.

“They’re gathering with an intent behind it – not just to enjoy the event,” Shaker Heights, OH Police Chief D. Scott Lee told reporters after dealing with mayhem in his own town during this year’s Fourth of July fireworks display where over 1000 teenagers were mobilized through social networking sites and

turned up at the event.

Large brawls broke out, a large contingent of officers were dispatched, and people trying to enjoy the Fourth of July celebration were sent home.

“All too often,” Chief Lee noted, “some of the intent is malicious. But I think it is

careful that we don’t label all groups that gather as ‘flash mobs’ who are out there with a bad intent.”

Dark side of social media

The power of social media to empower criminal behavior was never more apparent or frightening than

Rioters, using Twitter, chose targets for looting or burning or both. They also sent out messages to let each other know where the police presence was strong in order to avoid those spots.

One advantage for the police

But the technology did have one upside for the cops – they were able to identify a lot of the rioters via their Twitter and Facebook photos.

Rampaging thugs

In Philadelphia, several people were recently assaulted and injured after a mob of youngsters gathered on very short notice. One man was beaten by a group of 30 people who allegedly received messages on their phones via Twitter to show up and wreak havoc.

“What is making this unique today is the social media aspect,” Everett Gillison, Philadelphia’s deputy mayor for public safety, told reporters.

“They can communicate and congregate at a moment’s notice. That can overwhelm any municipality.”

“This is not ‘Leave it to Beaver’ type stuff we’re talking about here,” noted Philadelphia Police Commissioner



Several police cars and buildings are set ablaze on Tottenham High Road in London after youths took to the streets in a riot that lasted several days. (Rex Features via AP)

important to point out that not all young adults who gather are there with malicious intent.

“Our concern is the ones who take advantage of the opportunity to create problems and use the group as a smoke screen to commit crimes. I think we need to be

during the riots in London. Young people using their BlackBerrys, iPhones, and cell phones frantically sent out text messages to thousands of people.

One looter’s message read: “If you’re down for making money, we’re about to go hard in east London.”

Continued on Next Page



As Seen In the October 2011 Issue

How do we police the flash mob?

APB SPECIAL REPORT: The Dark Side of Twitter

Charles Ramsey. "We are talking about serious crimes being committed, and people being injured."

Ramsey said this behavior by young people, some as young as 11 years old, has to stop.

"I'm not in the social business here. We're police officers, and we're going to lock them up. They can go crying to their mother and father later on," he said.

To combat the marauding mobs of kids roaming the streets, the Philadelphia P.D. has instituted a curfew. Anyone under the age of 18 must be off the streets by 9 PM on Friday and Saturday nights in problem-plagued areas of the city.

The police are rounding up minors caught outside after the curfew hours and calling their parents to come and pick up their kids. Parents can face fines of \$500 if their children are violating the curfew, or charges of child neglect if they don't come to the station and take them in a timely manner.

"Social networking is not the issue," Ramsey continued. "It's how people are misusing it in order to gather and then commit a crime. The media coined the term 'flash mobs.' It's not the right term. I prefer 'rampaging

thugs."

Call goes out on Twitter and looting begins

On June 23, over 20 youngsters arrived via subway in Upper Darby, outside Philadelphia, and looted several hundred dollars of sneakers, socks and wrist watches from a Sears store. Their haul wasn't especially impressive, but the sheer size of the group and the speed of the roughly five-minute operation made it impossible for the police to organize an effort to control them.

These sorts of thefts are bedeviling both police and retailers, who say some of the heists were orchestrated and boasted about afterward on social networking sites like Facebook.

In recognition of the problem, the National Retail Federation published an unusual report recommending some practical steps stores can take to stop the robberies before things get out of hand. You can check their website for more information.

Gangsta rapper mobilizes fans

In mid-August, a Tweet from the popular rapper "The Game" encouraged his 580,000 followers to call a number and inquire about an

internship with his band.

The number people were told to call turned out to be the help line for the Compton Sheriff's Station of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department.

Captain Mike Parker, who headed up damage control during and after the incident, said the unexpected deluge of calls delayed the agency's response to numerous emergency calls.

"The calls lasted for hours," Parker said. "As soon as deputies and dispatchers hung up each phone, they rang again."

A number of legitimate emergency calls came in during that time, including two robberies, a stolen vehicle, a missing person report, a hit and run, and a spousal abuse, but deputies were delayed in responding because of the chaos.

"We don't know how many people needed help but couldn't get through to us because of the overwhelmed phone lines," Captain Parker noted.

Parker tweeted to The Game while the phones were still ringing, asking him to remove the phone number and cautioning the rapper that public safety was being compromised.

Although he did not re-

spond to Captain Parker or (initially) reporters' calls for comment, The Game did have time to send a tweet to the *Los Angeles Times* that said, "it wasn't me (shaggy voice)."

He suggested that his Twitter account had been hacked by someone else. In another tweet, he said it was an accident:

"Yall can track a tweet down but cant solve murders ! Dat was an accident but maybe now yall can actually do yall job !!!! #iSpeak4ThePeople."

The LA County Sheriff's Dept. opened a criminal investigation into the incident including reviewing charges of obstructing officers by making harassing phone calls and knowingly and maliciously disrupting communication over a public safety radio frequency.

Parker pointed out that because law enforcement agencies have to follow the rules of evidence and prove the sender's intent as well as who actually sent the message, the case was closed pending the surfacing of new evidence such as the identifying of someone who was actually physically hurt during the chaos.

One interesting side bar is that it appears the way the LASD handled it actually

Continued on Next Page



As Seen In the October 2011 Issue

How do we police the flash mob?

APB SPECIAL REPORT: The Dark Side of Twitter

impacted the suspect. For the first time anyone can recollect, a gangsta rapper went on CNN live and formally apologized to a Sheriff's Department for whatever problems the "accident" caused.

California mayhem

In another incident sparked by the social media frenzy, a young man was shot in the head during a flash-mob flare-up in Venice last April, sending scores of panicked tourists and residents screaming and running into the streets.

"It looked like a human tidal wave," said Spencer L. Sirlin, 27, a Hollywood booking agent who witnessed the attack. The shooting occurred amid a flash mob crowd that was organized at least in part via Twitter at the shoreline basketball courts along Ocean Front Walk in Los Angeles. It was just one of many incidents in our largest state where social media contributed to mayhem on the streets.

Agency cuts cell phone service

In mid-August, the public transit system in the San Francisco Area – the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART)

Authority – made a controversial decision to cut cell phone service, which keeps signals clear even in tunnels, in an attempt to derail a protest organized by an activist group known as Anonymous.

Demonstrators were gathering to protest a fatal shooting where BART officers killed a man on a subway who was approaching them with a knife.

BART did warn riders that the protests could interrupt service and that they were shutting down cell service as a precautionary measure.

Lt. Andy Alkire of the BART police told the *Bay City News* that the cell service shutdown was a "great tool to utilize for this specific purpose."

A few days later, as a retaliatory move, Anonymous hacked into a BART website and put out a call for people to come to a rally to protest against the agency in person.

Our neighbors to the north have not been immune to the mob-like violence organized by messages sent to thousands of people.

In Vancouver, the public celebration of the final match of the Vancouver Canucks and Boston Bruins in the Stanley Cup Final descended

into a night of rampage leaving more than 150 people injured, more than 50 businesses damaged, 15 cars destroyed and at least 14 officers with cuts, bites and in one case, a concussion.

It was the worst riot in Vancouver's history.

Mayor Gregor Robertson said there was no advance warning and that police and city officials were caught off guard.

"There had been absolutely no signs of this coming," Robertson said the day after the riots. "Both during the G-20 leaders' summit in Toronto and the 2010 Olympics, these thugs were well known to be organizing and preparing to take action and engage in criminal activities out on the streets. There were no indications of that leading into last night."

Robertson, Premier Christy Clark and Police Chief Jim Chu all defended the decision to encourage as many as 100,000 people to come into downtown Vancouver to watch the games on huge screens at designated fan zones.

They did support law enforcement efforts to quell the riot, but Robertson conceded the city and the province will have to review the actions of police and city officials to

determine what went wrong to make sure similar riots won't happen again.

He added that the lack of forewarning about "anarchists and thugs" planning to bring hammers and Molotov cocktails to a public party may mean police will have to adopt new methods of intelligence-gathering and precautionary measures in the future.

NYPD assigns top expert to deal with problem

In May, a man was shot dead at a Queens junior high school reunion which had drawn hundreds of unexpected participants when word of the bash went viral on Twitter.

That and other incidents prompted the New York City Police Dept. to refocus their efforts on tracking people who attempt to gather crowds on short notice with criminal intent and then brag about their crimes on Twitter, Facebook and other popular sites.

Commissioner Ray Kelly, long a strong proponent of incorporating new technologies in his crime fighting arsenal, put Kevin O'Connor, one of the NYPD's top experts on online crime as well as gang violence, in charge.

O'Connor, a 23-year veter-

Continued on Next Page



As Seen In the October 2011 Issue

How do we police the flash mob?

APB SPECIAL REPORT: The Dark Side of Twitter

an, is known for his success in using online sources to make arrests of child pornographers and other sexual predators. O'Connor also had considerable success at his former command at the Manhattan North Gang Unit for finding critical evidence online that resulted in a number of arrests of individuals suspected in homicides and attempted homicides.

NYPD officials credit online evidence with solving a number of serious crimes, including the arrest of Calvin Pietri, one of six people arrested in the fatal beating of a gay man in Queens.

Pietri bragged about the murder on Facebook.

Kayla Henriques, who had a feud with her friend over a \$20 loan for diapers before stabbing her to death, was arrested after she wrote about the incident on Facebook.

The Facebook posting was all the evidence the police needed to get a warrant for her arrest.

Complicated problem

The problems for law enforcement as the profession tries to protect people and property impacted by flash mobs are as complicated as they are fraught with liability issues and other legal problems.

And some experts are saying the facts do not support

the notion that the unruly crowds are gathering because of tweets and Facebook postings.

This past summer, Cleveland Mayor Frank Jackson made the decision to veto legislation criminalizing the use of Facebook, Twitter and other social media for assembling unruly crowds or encouraging people to commit a crime despite the fact that every member of the Cleveland City Council voted to approve the measure.

"It's very difficult to enforce something that's unconstitutional," Jackson said in an interview with CNN. "To make a criminal activity of just having a conversation, whether some acts of criminal activity are associated with it or not, goes beyond reason."

The situation in Cleveland is a dramatic example of the challenges facing officials who try to control social media as a means of combating the sort of spontaneous group violence that has marred London, Philadelphia, Los Angeles and other cities across the U.S.

Free-speech advocates say that efforts to restrict conversation in any way are on shaky constitutional ground. In addition, the nature of the Internet with its open flow of information makes controlling what people are allowed to say, post or tweet close to impossible.

Is social media really the culprit?

This summer, when more than two dozen teens ransacked a 7-Eleven store in Germantown, Maryland, it was recorded by surveillance cameras and went viral on YouTube. Montgomery County Police Chief Tom Manger told CNN he believed the youths organized their raid on social networks.

But after interviewing the suspects, Montgomery police discovered that the group was on a bus returning from a county fair when its members decided to raid the convenience store.

"It doesn't appear that Facebook or any of those things were used," Capt. Paul Starks said. Later, data reviewed by CNN found no evidence of coordination having taken place on Twitter.

The 7-Eleven episode followed a high-profile series of purported flash mob assaults on the opening night of the Wisconsin State Fair.

However, Milwaukee Police Chief Edward Flynn said that the mobs had not organized via social media, prompting some observers to say that social media has become a popular scapegoat for flash-mob violence resulting in robberies and assaults of bystanders – and in London's case, widespread rioting and looting.

Instead, some of the criminal activity resulting from unruly mobs has occurred when large crowds gather for state fairs and local festivals.

The incident in Cleveland that sparked the City Council's move to criminalize using social media to organize violent protests involved unruly teens disrupting a street fair. Twitter messages at the time contained eyewitness reports of the violence, but not tweets by young thugs organizing their mayhem.

.....

However this worrisome phenomenon plays out, these new technologies are having profound changes on the way people communicate with each other and their governments.

Paul Levinson, a professor of communication at Fordham University in New York and author of "New New Media," believes these events point to a potential change in the way the disaffected express their displeasure with government.

"The larger message of these assemblages of people, brought together through online invitations and publicized through Twitter and other new media, is that we may be witnessing a profound shift, even in democracies, from representative to direct forms of governance," Levinson said.